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“Winged Words”: Scriptures and Classics as Iconic Texts¹

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Abstract: We consider first some difficulties of facilely differentiating “religious” from “cultural” phenomena, and similarly “scriptures” from (“religious” or “cultural”) “classics.” Texts in the latter three categories can be identified by their “iconic” status within a given tradition or context, but only on the basis of their social function, not by their form or content. We then consider how it may be possible to study “scriptural” texts constructively in shared discourse with scholars of differing religious backgrounds. Such a common discourse would be facilitated by a heuristic model of scripture as a text extending functionally in two directions, towards the human through interpretation and towards an Absolute or Transcendent ontologically (allowing it to participate in or mediate something of the Absolute to contingent human beings). Finally, we consider whether this model is applicable to “classics” as well as “scriptures” and conclude that on balance it is not. The model thus confirms one of the differences between classics and scriptures.

Keywords: scripture, classic (both “cultural” and “religious”), cultural “icons”, categories/genres of literature/texts

For a number of years, I taught an undergraduate course entitled “Scriptures and Classics,” which was offered explicitly as a topical introduction to the history of religion.

The particular topic was thus not the sole focus, but rather meant to serve as a fruitful point of entry into the rich, complicated world of diverse religious traditions, and religious history, thought, and practice more generally. Why this choice of topic makes sense, when a straight “scriptures” course might seem more logical, is something that I often thought about, especially since the “classics” I used were not all unambiguously “religious” in character (even though all reflected religious thought and usage in their respective cultural contexts).

I will return to this question, but first a bit of “back-story” to explain why I start by referring to this course. I came to the study of religion, and specifically the history of religion, as an academic enterprise rather late, without work in religion before I began doctoral studies. I had instead devoted myself to Western history and comparative literature involving Greek, Latin, French, and German. Once engaged in doctoral study, after spending some time with Sanskrit and Indian studies before finally landing in Arabic and Islamic studies, I inevitably brought to the wider historical and comparative study of religion my own background in the Western classics, both ancient and European. As a result, I often puzzled about but never sorted out satisfactorily for myself exactly where the line between the cultural and the religious, the philosophical and the theological, can be drawn. Literature in particular presented, in my estimation, an arena in which the religious intersected, if not permeated, other types of human meaning-making that we usually label “literature,” “poetry,” “philosophy,” or the like. The traditional literary “classics” of east and west seemed to me, however, to include both overtly religious texts and also texts that one would not identify as “religious” but which have been culturally and imaginatively formative and generative—texts that are truly

iconic in the sense of being among the highest achievements of their particular linguistic, ethnic, regional, national, or cultural traditions, and thus emblematic of those traditions—and as such also influenced by, and important to, one or more religious traditions of their respective cultures as well.

Such important literary works that are defining expressions, or what I would call “icons,” of a given culture, but neither scriptures nor even overtly religious texts, I would distinguish for our purposes as “cultural classics” to separate them from non-scriptural “religious classics.” I consider “cultural classics” to include the Homeric epics, the great Greek tragedies, *The Aeneid*, *Don Quixote*, Shakespeare, *The 1001 Nights*, Kalidasa’s *Shakuntala*, the Chinese *Dream of the Red Chamber*, or Lady Murasaki’s *Tale of the Genji*. By contrast, I would suggest as “religious classics” works such as Augustine’s *Confessions*, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Teresa of Ávila’s *Interior Castle*, Maimonides’ *Guide for the Perplexed*, Halevi’s *Kuzari*, Ghazali’s *Revivification of the Religious Sciences*, Rumi’s *Mathnawi*, Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, Ramanuja’s *Sri [Brahma Sûtra] Bhasya*, the Japanese *Kojiki*, and Dogen’s “vernacular” [*Kana*] *Shobogenzo*. One could argue about some of these, and there are also texts that are difficult to locate firmly in only one of these two categories: the various medieval Arthurian Grail romances, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Goethe’s *Faust*, the Sanskrit epics of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, or the eighth-century Japanese *Nihon Shoki* are examples. Certainly there is much religion behind and inside each of these, but are they really significantly “religious” in intent and content? Most perplexing are some of the famous Chinese “four books and five classics” (*shu* and *jing*), for example the *Mengzi*, which some scholars would call “cultural” or “philosophical,” others “religious,” and still others even “scriptural.” So

these two categories are decidedly only provisional or heuristic ones to put alongside “scripture” *per se*.

I use *icon* here simply to mean major religiously or culturally charged objects, including books—objects with symbolic, signifying capacity and observable power and/or authority in their respective contexts: objects that are culturally or religiously meaningful for anyone who sees them as *emblematic* of something larger, whether something religious, philosophical, or “cultural.” Any classic, religious or not, like any scripture, carries a surplus of meaningful signification, symbolism, or affective power that is important, even crucial, to those for whom it is in some sense “classic.” In other words, I use “iconic” to designate a book (or anything else) that carries significant cultural and/or religious, and consequently intellectual and/or spiritual, meaning. I want to leave it at this, without hairsplitting as to what is religiously versus culturally significant, or whether anything of human significance can be “*merely* cultural” or “*merely* religious.”

This question as to where religion stops and culture begins in literature or any other creative work in the history of civilization was very much at the back of my mind when I began teaching “Scriptures and Classics” in the 1980s. From the outset, I included works that were “classics,” but not unambiguously “religious” “classics” in a given culture, and for the most part not “scriptural” in any usual sense. Thus, in addition to scriptures such as the Enuma Elish, Torah, New Testament, Qur’ân, Veda, Upanishads, Gita, Buddhist Sûtras, Guru Granth Sahib, or the like, I treated the *Analects of Confucius* and the Taoist *Zhuangzi*, about the designation of which as “classic” or “scripture” we could argue, but I also mixed in *Gilgamesh*, the *Aeneid*, Basho’s *Narrow Road to Oku*,

and *Black Elk Speaks*. We could as easily have read Teresa's *Interior Castle* or *The Divine Comedy* or varied mystical classics of Jewish, Islamic, Christian, or Buddhist tradition; or literary classics such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Sophocles' *Antigone*, the *Mahabharata*, *Don Quixote*, or *The Brothers Karamazov*. I was not interested in the classification of the texts so much as reading texts that have functioned, we might say, "iconically," whether as scriptures in religious faith and practice or as "religious" or "cultural" literary classics that either present religious issues or simply reflect powerfully the checkered role of religion in human affairs.

The major reason I juxtaposed overtly non-scriptural, "cultural classics" such as *Gilgamesh* or Basho's *Narrow Road* with scriptural texts such as the Vedas, the Lotus Sûtra, or the Bible, was that I wanted my students to find it difficult (and often problematic), as I do, to delineate too sharply where the "religious" and the "cultural" part ways, both in our own Western traditions, where we generally think it is clear how they divide, and much more in other traditions that have traditionally not tried to distinguish religion from culture or even religious from secular. The distinctions among great cultural texts we term "classics," great religious texts we also dub "classics," and the special type of religious texts we identify as "scripture" are similarly not rigid or absolute. Indeed, we apply all three categories only on the basis of the divergent histories of their respective uses and functions, not their content or form. Thus it is finally what I am calling the *iconic* character of all the texts that I chose for the course, not their specific category among different *kinds* of iconic books, which, along with their interest for the history of religion, qualified them.

I cite this course experience because it was the context in which I came to consider the question of the distinctions that we apply to iconic books in order to clarify either what makes one a scripture and another a “religious” classic, or what shows us in a “classic” where the religious leaves off and the cultural or even the secular begins. (Here, please note that I am bracketing altogether the question of great religious texts that might be termed “secondary” but still function *de facto* as “scriptures”—the Mishna, the Hadith, the Bhagavad Gita, or the Ramcarita Manasa, for example.) Ultimately I decided that while it is very useful in the study of religion to understand the important phenomenon of texts that have functioned historically as “scripture,” it is less useful to worry too much about whether even some foundational texts—the *Analects*, *Laozi*, and *Zhuangzi* being notable examples—be called “classics” or “scriptures” (in these cases it is my judgment that they have been both). Nor is it of great consequence whether we distinguish non-scriptural, “religious” classics too sharply from “classic” literary or philosophical texts that may have minimal overt religious content but major moral and philosophical import. “Classic” is a category even more difficult to generalize about and to make satisfactorily precise than is “scripture.” Broadly speaking, however, such a classification comes down (as with scripture) to its *iconic* functions in a given society and tradition. Just as I have argued elsewhere that no text is inherently “scriptural” in its content or origin but becomes so only in its reception and function, neither is any text inherently “classical” because of form or content, but instead only so because of its *Wirkungsgeschichte* as a defining, *iconic* text in a given cultural and literary tradition. I would argue that a “classic” of a given tradition can only be distinguished on the one hand from a scriptural text by (i) the latter’s ritual, devotional, and liturgical functions

and (ii) its uniquely sacred and authoritative status, and on the other hand from literary texts of lesser cultural importance by the clearly *iconic* power of its cultural status and function. It of course achieves its status as “classic” because of its inherent quality and universality of content, but it can be recognized as classic only by the status accorded it over time by generations of readers or listeners who find it uniquely important and treat it in iconic fashion in their cultural context.

Here James Watts’ elegant suggestion in his 2006 article is a helpful one. He argues there that we should see scripture as a text that is “ritualized along three different dimensions”: the semantic, performative, and iconic. This is useful in that we may agree that while scriptures generally exhibit all three dimensions, most classics lack at least one of them—usually the performative, in my estimation. This tallies with my own judgment that Siegfried Morenz and Johannes Leipold got it right over a half-century ago when they identified ritual and especially liturgical functions as particularly indicative of scriptural books (at least in Mediterranean and Near Eastern traditions). I would add the ascription of ultimate theological or religious authority to the liturgical/devotional function as characteristic of scriptures, but either way, texts that we term “classics,” even “religious classics,” but *not* “scriptures,” usually lack most performative functions that scriptures exhibit, apart from their typical semantic and iconic role as texts to be memorized, repeated, and alluded to in much the same way that scriptural texts are.

I have distinguished these text categories and terminology at such length because I think it salutary in studying religion to try to see the gray areas as well as the possibly black-and-white ones in our scholarly as well as everyday usages. Reading the papers prepared for the present symposium, I think questions of such categories may also arise

in our discussion, in particular of a contribution such as that of Karl Solibakke, but also several others. I do not want, however, to debate issues such as the cultural roles of the Vulgate, Luther, or King James Bible versus those of the *Aeneid* in Western Christian culture down to the twentieth century, or the question of the *Bhagavad Gita* as part of the *Mahabharata* epic and the appropriate classification of both in light of the Vedas, Upanishads, or Puranas. Rather, I want to focus on, first, some particular reflections about iconic *scriptural* texts that I hope will prove more fruitful and suggestive, before closing with some thoughts and questions about iconic “*classic*” texts in the light of these reflections.

Specifically, I want to consider two questions: First, how can we best think about, or conceptualize, the functionality of iconic scriptural texts in such a way that we as scholars can deal with them adequately in today’s religiously and culturally plural academy? Second, can any answers to this question about scriptures also be applied to those other iconic texts that are not scriptures but “religious” or “cultural” classics?

First, regarding “scriptures”: I have puzzled a long time about how to think and talk most usefully about a scriptural book in a scholarly context where participating scholars (as well as any listeners or readers) are variously adherents of the tradition in which the text is seen as scripture and adherents of other traditions who do not view the text as “scripture” at all (indeed who may view wholly different texts, or no texts at all, as “scripture”). In other words, how might scholars representing both *emic* and *etic* approaches to a given scriptural text fruitfully speak about and study that text in the same hermeneutic locus? This is not easy: many persons, scholars or not, have great difficulty with any attempt to contextualize historically and to analyze their own scripture, let alone

with historical or literary criticism of its inception, redaction, and fixation. In considering this problem, I wrote a short German *Festschrift* article nearly twenty years ago that contained the seed of an idea that I have developed in more recent years in two further English lectures, one of which is to be published in Budapest this winter (Graham 1994, [2011]).² In what follows I draw on these earlier efforts to present what I hope to be relevant considerations for this symposium regarding both scriptural and classic “iconic books.”

Briefly put, regarding the question as to how a scriptural text might be studied and discussed by a circle of scholars, some of whom consider the text “scripture” and some of whom do not, my solution has been to conceive of scripture heuristically as involving a text that can be seen in its religious function as opening out or extending in two opposite directions, one the human, worldly, or mundane extension and the other the supramundane or transcendent extension. The first, mundane (*diesseitige*) extension is the interpretive engagement with the text by human interpreters who consider it scripture—those to whom it presents itself as a uniquely sacred and authoritative text preserved in writing, print, memorization, chanted repetition, artistic rendering, or the like. In my original German article I argued that this dimension of scripture is characterized by what I termed *Deutungsnotwendigkeit* “interpretive necessity”—every scripture is *necessarily* always being interpreted, in how it is read, recited, illustrated, glossed, handled, or otherwise engaged. The second, and opposite, extension of any scripture involves its linkage to or participation in a transcendent, divine, or otherwise veridical dimension—for the faithful, this is the transmundane (*jenseitige*) connection of their sacred text to some Absolute, be it Truth, Knowledge, God, the Transcendent, or

Ultimate Reality. This extension, in my original nomenclature, involves a *Bedeutungsüberschuß*, “a surplus of meaning,” an awareness on the part of the faithful that any text perceived as scripture is always more than merely its words and text; it always extends beyond human capacities for understanding it into an ontologically different dimension of reality, truth, and meaning—what a religious person might call the Divine, Transcendent, or Ultimate dimension, which is what he or she sees as crucial to making the text *scripture*.

My chosen terminology here is not meant to be theological but rather descriptive and functional: I am arguing that when we observe how scripture is dealt with *emically* by the faithful of a given religious tradition, what appears is a text that extends in two, diametrically opposed, directions: one towards the faithful (which I now term *the interpretive* extension), and one (which I now term the *ontological* extension) toward the Divine, the Transcendent, God, Truth, or the Ultimate—whatever is perceived by the faithful as the source of their scripture and/or the ultimate, veridical Reality that that scripture mediates to those that “have ears to hear” or “eyes to see.”

This is not a complex or particularly startling observation, but heuristically, making it explicit when speaking of scripture opens up possibilities for productive exchange among scholars who themselves differ sharply in their religious and philosophical allegiances—and specifically in their notions about the status of *das Jenseitige*, the transcendent dimension of reality. Whether from an emic or etic standpoint, scriptures can be considered phenomenologically iconic texts with a special power to mediate, in particular historical contexts, between the mundane, human world and the transmundane, ideal, or normative Reality that *homo religiosus* everywhere has

understood to transcend in some absolute way this contingent, material world of sense-perception. That Ultimate Reality may be conceptualized as God or the gods, Truth or Beauty, Changelessness or Eternality, the Dharma or the Dao, Wisdom or the Good, Order or Reason, the Universal or the Absolute. But however conceived, it is always whatever is whole and perfect over against the contingent and limited human condition. Whether this deeper, more abiding Reality is conceived concretely or abstractly, “scriptures” are those texts that religious communities have considered to be its prime mediators. To make this clearer, let me offer examples for each of the two extensions of scripture that I am suggesting are primary to its role in mediating trans-temporal reality in the temporal world.

With regard to the interpretive extension, it is a truism, but an important one, that scripture cannot *exist* without constant interpretation. Here I want to repeat a point I have made above and elsewhere (Graham 1986): scripturality is a *functional, relational* quality of a text, not a formal, absolute one. A text only becomes scripture when a community of faith deems it uniquely sacred and authoritative *and uses it as such*, and the interpretive extension of a scriptural text into the minds and lives of the faithful is a defining scriptural function. Simply to read or hear a text or to treat it iconically as scripture is already to engage in interpretation. Scripture is always being extended in the meaning-making of the faithful, always becoming something more than its concrete text alone. Post-modern literary criticism has made this point less radical than it might have been thirty years ago; but it is the case that every text, and none more so than a book of scripture, is at every moment being interpreted by any reader in the light of his or her comprehension, experience, context, faith, and tradition. Just as there is no one physical

form of a text that defines it as “scripture,” neither is there one “literal” or “true” meaning of a scriptural text, however much every literalist orthodoxy wants to insist that there is. The interpretive extension of scripture, when we conceive of it relationally instead of absolutely, means that scripture could not function as scripture—that is, as holy and authoritative—without the implicit and explicit interpretation that occurs in the very act of treating it as scripture rather than as merely another text. In a real sense, there is no “*sola scriptura*,” even for the first Protestant reformers, since anyone who takes a scriptural text as sole authority already in doing so stands both in an interpretive tradition and in a discrete historical context and cannot escape reading the scriptural word through that tradition and out of that context. In a real sense, the scripture vs. tradition tension that has produced so much polemic in Christian sectarianism and in academic scholarship, is a false dichotomy; scripture is always read in dialogue with whatever cumulative tradition the reader stands in, however novel his or her reading may be, and conversely, tradition is always informed by past and present scriptural readings, both individual and collective.

A telling example of interpretive extension is found in the Jewish notion of the “oral Torah” (*Tôrâh she be-'al peh*), which encompasses the Mishna, Talmud, and Midrash. This is the vast body of discussion and commentary of the rabbis, built up over centuries, on the meanings of the written Torah (*Tôrâh she bi-ktâb*). Historically, this oral Torah has carried the same authority for Jews as the written Torah. The Oral Torah is held to have been revealed already to Moses at Sinai alongside the written: whatever interpretations the rabbis have been able to tease out of the written Torah were already given by God at Sinai for the guidance of His people. Here the division between

scripture and tradition is no longer clear—and in considerable degree no longer meaningful: functionally, neither exists without the other, and both are ontologically and theologically Torah, God’s revealed Law. At Sinai, God saw not only to the revelation of His Law, but also to its exegesis. The written Torah without the interpreting tradition of rabbinic learning is unthinkable. “Love of Torah” is the heart of rabbinic Judaism, determining every other aspect of the tradition, and fundamentally it means unceasing Torah interpretation.

One striking example from Islamic tradition is also noteworthy. While Muhammad was living, he was the effective interpreter of the individual *qur’âns* that were being revealed through him as God’s messenger. After his death, the community could only rely on transmitted traditions of his verbal utterances and his observed example to assist them in interpreting the Word of God. One admonition ascribed to him and preserved in the text of an hadith says, “The *Sunnah* [tradition] is judge over the Qur’ân, not the Qur’ân over the *Sunnah*” (Al-Dârimî 1966, 3). Authentic or not, this saying expresses the inevitable interpretation that mediates (and thus determines) scriptural meaning among the faithful in any tradition.

The Hindu and Buddhist traditions also provide clear examples of scripture’s “interpretive extension.” In the Hindu case, it has been historically almost unthinkable for anyone to read a sacred text independently of a qualified teacher, a guru who stands in a long line of teachers (the *guruparamparâ*). Thomas Coburn puts it well in noting that in India, “written documents, unvivified by personal relationship, are meaningless” (Coburn 1989). Meaning is developed and maintained here in a teaching tradition based on interpreting texts. In the related Buddhist case, texts that can be called scriptures have

been in a constant process of expansion over the centuries as new texts attach themselves to older ones and claim to be equally the *Buddhavacana*, or “Word of the Buddha” preserved in tradition, voiced by Buddhas in every age, or rediscovered long after the last historical Buddha’s death. These texts clearly expand as well as expound the meaning of the oldest sacred texts, and in this way the so-called “Buddhist Canon” of the *Tripitaka* (“Three Baskets”), has been largely built up through the addition of later interpretive texts. This has been especially visible in the Mahayana, where one sees the tendency to identify a single text, for example the Lotus Sûtra, as the holiest of scriptures and the key to interpreting all other scriptures. Sometimes even purely commentarial texts like the *Abhidharma* books are reckoned as scripture: one sûtra (the *Adhyâshaya-samcodana*) goes so far as to say that “anything that is well said is a word of the Buddha” (cited from Shantideva’s *Shikṣā Samuccaya* and from the *Anguttara Nikāya* by McDermott 1984, 29, and Griffiths 1994, 50). This blurs completely the line between scriptural word and interpretive word in a kind of infinite interpretive extension of the basic *Buddhavacana*.

We could multiply examples, but the point would be the same: scripture as a relational reality rather than a literary genre is always being interpreted by being used; it never stands alone, apart from its interpretation. This is both its dynamic quality and its endless potential relevance to any situation at any time, any place.

When we turn from this interpretive extension to my postulated second and contrasting ontological extension of scripture in the understanding of the faithful, in addition to describing this veridical extension as ontological, we might also identify this dimension of scripture as its “transcendent valence” over against the “exegetical valence” of the interpretive extension. “Ontological extension” or “transcendent valence” is a term

meant to reflect the fact that a scriptural text is for the faithful never *merely* a text. In scriptural piety, the tangible text of scripture has rarely if ever been seen as its essence or deepest reality; it is what the text communicates or mediates that ultimately counts. There is an observable tendency in every tradition for a scriptural text to partake of the transcendent reality it is perceived to reveal, represent, or mediate. Whether we are talking about Torah, which is for faithful Jews something far greater than the biblical text; or the Guru Granth Sahib, which for Sikhs is far more than its words or venerated physical form; or the Veda, which for Hindus is the Eternal Wisdom, the cosmic *Śabda*, or “Sound” at the heart of creation and reality—in each case we are speaking about a scripture that shares in, or even is itself, The Divine or Ultimate Reality. One recurring aspect of the treatment of a text as holy and authoritative, as bearing ultimate truth, is that for the faithful the text rapidly comes to participate in, and thus to mediate or even embody, transcendence in the mundane, contingent world where it is encountered. Scripturally oriented mystics may understand and express this best (witness the personification of Torah in kabbalistic thought, which holds, as Holdrege [1987, 219] describes it, that “Torah is not simply a book to be studied; it is a living aspect of God with which one can enter into divine communion”). For any person of faith, however, this phenomenon is functionally an expression of the ontological extension of the holy Word into Transcendence (or of Transcendence into the holy Word), and it is this that ultimately gives that Word its unique authority and sacrality as scripture.

In the Islamic case, this is most vivid in the Muslim understanding of the Qur’ân as God’s verbatim Speech, which can best be understood in Christian terms by saying that the Qur’ân is the Divine Logos equivalent in Christian faith not to the Bible, but to

the Christ (thus likening Qur'ân recitation to the Eucharist). Muslims recognized early on the danger for their theocentrism of calling the Word of God in the Qur'ân an eternal Divine attribute, but the fact that this was a point of contention at all indicates how much the Qur'ân as God's Speech participates in the Divine, even if it is theologically understood as the created Word rather than an eternal attribute of the One God. I find great intuitive truth regarding the transcendent tendency in Muslim experience of the Qur'ân in Clifford Geertz's comment that in reciting the Qur'ân, the Muslim "chants not words about God but of Him, and indeed, as those words are His essence, chants God himself" (Geertz 1976, 1490).

Even in the Christian case, the sense for many Christians of the Bible as God's Word makes the Scriptures not only a testimony to the Christ but a medium of contact with God in Christ. At the heart of the book tradition, Luther himself testifies to this in statements such as this: "...God is especially concerned with the revelation and recognition of his Son; throughout the entire Scripture, Old and New Testaments, *everything is directed to the Son.*"³ Often he speaks of the Holy Spirit as the mediating force in the Scriptures, calling them, for instance, "the Holy Spirit's own special book, writ and word" (*des heiligen Geists eigen, sonderlich Buch, Schrift und Wort* [*Luthers Werke* 54: 474]). The Christian earns the name "Christian" only through his faith, which Luther explicitly identifies as *auditum verbi Dei*, "hearing the Word of God" (Hirsch and Rückert 1929, 250; cf. *Luthers Werke* 37: 512-13). Scripture is not only the linguistic center of Christian life; it is finally also the medium of intimacy with God Himself, through His Word, theologically understood as the *Logos* of the Christ, mediated in the *logos* of the Bible.

If we consider Hindu traditions, we find in their treatment of the Veda many traits similar to Jewish attitudes toward the Torah, above all the idea that Veda—holy Knowledge or Wisdom—already existed before Creation and continues to exist eternally. What is striking is the repeated claim that “Veda” is much more than a body of texts. Thus we read in *Rg Veda* X.164.39: “The hymns [of the Veda] exist in the immortal [realm] (*Aksara*), beyond the universe (*Vyoman*) where all the gods live. Whoever knows not that immortal [realm], how could the hymns help him? You, who do know it, are grounded in Eternity.” In the *Taittirîya Brahmana*, the “three Vedas” (i.e. *Rg*, *Sama*, and *Yajur*) are described as “threefold Wisdom” (*traya veda*), which is often understood in later texts as a manifestation of the Veda as primordial Being, equivalent to Brahman or an aspect thereof. Still later, in the Puranas, we find that Veda is made an equal to, or even identified with, Brahman or Visnu or Śiva—namely Supreme Reality. The transcendent character of the Veda can also be glimpsed in the unforgettable answer of an eighteenth-century Brahmin to a European visitor who asked him about “the vedic books”: *Vedam est, quidquid ad religionem pertinet, vedam no sunt libri*, “Veda is that which pertains to religion; books are not Veda” (Zachariae 1921, 160). In other words, Veda transcends its earthly linguistic vehicle.

To say that a biblical or qur’ânic word is “God’s Word” is to say that in this Word the faithful have the possibility of encountering God. In an analogous way, in Buddhist tradition, the Mahayana in particular, we find frequently the attempt to identify Sacred Scripture with the Holy Teaching or eternal Dharma that it embodies, and also with both the Buddha himself and the Ultimate Realization of release from rebirth—Nirvana. This is evident in the *Lotus Sûtra*, which says of itself: “[Among other scriptures,] ... this

scripture is the first. / If there is anyone who can hold it, / then he holds the Buddha-body” (trans. from Chinese by Hurwitz 1976, 193; cf. trans. from Sanskrit by Kern 1884, 21: 242). Here “Buddha-body” is the *Dharmakaya*, or eternal form of the Buddha in Mahayana philosophy. *Dharma* refers both to the Buddha's Teaching, which is what Scriptures transmit, and also to the eternal Truth underlying all Reality, which is the goal of the *Dharma* as Teaching. The *Dharmakaya* is associated with the latter. Here Scripture becomes not just a text, but Ultimate Truth itself. Mahayana commentators have also clearly linked Scripture, Dharma (as Teaching or Path), the Buddha-Nature, and Reality. With respect to the “*Prajñâpâramitâ*, or Perfection of Wisdom”, which is also the name of a genre of scripture, Dignâgâ says, for example,

Here Scripture is the Truth, the Book, and the path to Truth; all are referred to by the same term and interpenetrate. Scripture extends to encompass the Ultimate. the perfection of Wisdom [*Prajñâpâramitâ*] is nondual knowledge; it is also the [Buddha (*Tathagata*)] and [the goal] to be attained. The word also refers to the book and the path, since [the book and the path] have this [*Prajñâpâramitâ*] as their meaning and their goal (*Prajñâpâramitâ jñânam advayam sâ tathâgatah / sâdhyâ tâdârthyayogena tâcchabdyam granthamârgayoh*: text in Tucci 1947, 56; trans. Eckel 1992, 99-100).

Similarly, the famous exegete, Vasubandhu, in his *Abhidharmakośa* 4.32, says that “The Master’s true Dharma is twofold: it is scripture (*âgama*) and understanding (*adhigama*)” (trans. Eckel 1992, 100). In his commentary, he explains that *âgama* refers to both the three segments of the Buddhist canon (Sûtras, Vinaya, Abhidharma) and the understanding of the Path—the way to Enlightenment. These cases show that the Perfection of Wisdom is at once the Truth/Dharma, the Buddha, the scripture, and the

path to Truth; all interpenetrate as dimensions of the same ultimate reality. Scripture partakes of the Buddha nature, the Ultimate itself, of which the tangible scriptural word is only one manifestation.

If we can accept the dual scriptural extension I have described, at least as a heuristic model for thinking functionally about scripture, let us turn finally back to our other category of iconic books, namely “classics,” religious or cultural. Can we apply this model of dual extension to “classic” as well as “scriptural” texts? When I originally began to think about this essay, I thought that the model might also work for “classics,” since they also have an inextricable interpretive extension and are so culturally powerful and meaningful as texts that they too might be seen as mediating some larger realm of truth. On further reflection, however, I have come to believe that classics *do not* present the same kind of ontological extension that the faithful perceive in their scripture, even though the interpretive extension of each is obviously comparable in many ways. I do think that when we consider books that have functioned as scripture for any religious community, we find that these texts carry a mediating force derived from their perceived participation in transcendence—to varying degrees and in varying ways, from tradition to tradition, to be sure. On the other hand, even religious, let alone “cultural” classics, as much as they are beloved and deeply influential in a given context and tradition, do not carry the same quality of ontological *difference* or explicit *participation* in transcendence that a scriptural text typically does (and when they do, they function effectively as scriptures for some subset of the faithful). There seems to me a difference of category here, even though a classic text, whether primarily religious or cultural in character, can exercise great power in the lives of its readers, just as can a scripture.

If I had to fall back on the classic terms of history-of-religions scholarship, I would say that a scripture is always in some sense—in my model, in its ontological extension, obviously—what Gerardus van der Leeuw described as a *kratophany*, or manifestation of power, or what Mircea Eliade called a *hierophany*, or manifestation of the holy. I do not think that even the greatest classics of various cultures and traditions could easily be characterized by either term.

I have come, however, to appreciate the application of the term “iconic” to *both* “scriptures” *and* “classics.” Perhaps we could agree on that adjective as at least one that binds these two categories of text together. *Iconic texts* carry special power in both religious and cultural traditions. Often the same iconic text can be a scripture or a religious classic for many members of a given culture and also a cultural classic for many others in the same cultural world who nevertheless do not revere it as scripture. The King James Bible in the Anglophone world and the *Luther-Bibel* in the Germanic world have been iconic classics culturally in literature, rhetoric, politics, and art even as they have been iconic scriptures in their respective Protestant-Christian religious traditions. The conundrum of whether to translate the single Chinese term *jing* as “classic” in the case of the so-called “Confucian” text-traditions of Han and post-Han scholars and as “scripture” in the case of the foundational Daoist texts and Buddhist sūtras is both a reminder of the difficulty of cross-cultural translation and also a warning against too-rigid use of categories such as “classic” and “scripture” altogether. Still, the notion of translating *jing* in both cases as “iconic book(s)” is an attractive one that might bracket the issue of “scripture” versus “classic” and even “religious” versus “cultural” while still recognizing the shared power and religio-cultural significance of both kinds of texts. I do

not offer it as a solution I am ready to go to the mat for, but I do find it suggestive and worth pursuing further.

The iconic texts we call scriptures as well as those we call classics might both have one quality in common that we can agree on, if only as a gloss on the “iconic books” of our title. That is the quality encapsulated poetically in the famous Homeric phrase of my title tonight: *epea pteroenta*, “wingéd words.” I use this to designate not only speech that flies from the speaker’s or reciter’s or reader’s mouth to the ears of listeners (or from the page to the eyes of solitary readers), but also speech of which the words, phrases, tropes, or sentences have so impressed themselves on our language and thought that they are imbedded in our unconscious as well as conscious vocabulary. In other words, not only are they preeminent sources of citation and reference in public and private discourse; they also contain words often spoken or cited that lie so deeply imbedded in a given cultural vocabulary that many who use them are not even aware they are drawn from Bible, Homer, Laozi, Ramayana, Gita, Lotus Sûtra, Qur’ân, Dante, Shakespeare, Basho, Goethe, Montaigne, Melville, or the like. These words belong to the ages largely because of the profundity, historical importance, literary magnificence, persuasive power, sometimes perceived sacrality, and always *iconicity* of the texts from which they have taken flight again and again and soared into the collective consciousness and vocabulary of generation after generation. I suggest that scriptures and classics, as iconic books, are preeminently those texts that we might characterize alike as presenting *winged words*.

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¹ This contribution was given as a keynote address for the 2010 Syracuse symposium, not as a topical session paper; hence the style and documentation are somewhat more informal than would otherwise be the case.

² I am chary of repeating material I have previously published, but in this case, I think that using some of the same arguments and selected proof texts from these two earlier works is perhaps justified in that my purpose here is a different one, and also in that I was

asked to present my thinking about iconic books for this symposium and cannot ignore what I have written earlier and feel to be necessary for the topic at hand.

³ *Und sonderlich ist's Gott zu thun um die offenbarung und erkenntnis seines Sons, durch die gantze Schrift, Alts und Newen Testaments, Alles gehet auff den Son . . . (Luthers Werke 54:88).*